

Causation in the Age of the Cold War and Decolonization

Walls in the mind often stand longer than those built of concrete blocks.

—Willy Brandt, December 1991

Essential Question: Why and to what extent were the effects of the Cold War similar in the Eastern and Western Hemispheres?

The end of World War II marked the beginning of a new world order as the nations of Western Europe no longer dominated the world stage. The United States and the Soviet Union took over as the superpowers. In Western Europe, however, countries were free from domination by a superpower and retained their political independence and democratic governments. The Marshall Plan had helped them rebuild and achieve a level of economic prosperity that was unknown among the countries of Eastern Europe.

However, during this time, Western European colonial empires began to crumble as anti-imperialist sentiment fueled independence movements in Africa and Asia. Resentment of European and American economic imperialism also rose in Latin American countries, leading to revolutionary movements that aimed to overturn the political and social status quo in these countries. The United States and the Soviet Union regularly supported opposing sides in these clashes, projecting their own differences onto regional conflicts.

The Cold War also influenced economic, social, and cultural aspects of global events, providing further evidence that this conflict had far-reaching effects that affected the latter half of the 20th century.

Challenges to Existing Social Orders

The years following World War II were a time of unprecedented conflict as people and states challenged the established order. How they carried out their challenges, how the existing powers responded, and how the challenges were (or were not) resolved depended in part on the position of the challenging people or states in the geopolitical balance of power.

Toward the end of World War II, a serious ideological and economic rift emerged among the “Big Three” Allied powers—the Soviet Union, the United States, and Great Britain. The United States and Great Britain, along with France (which had recently been liberated from German occupation),

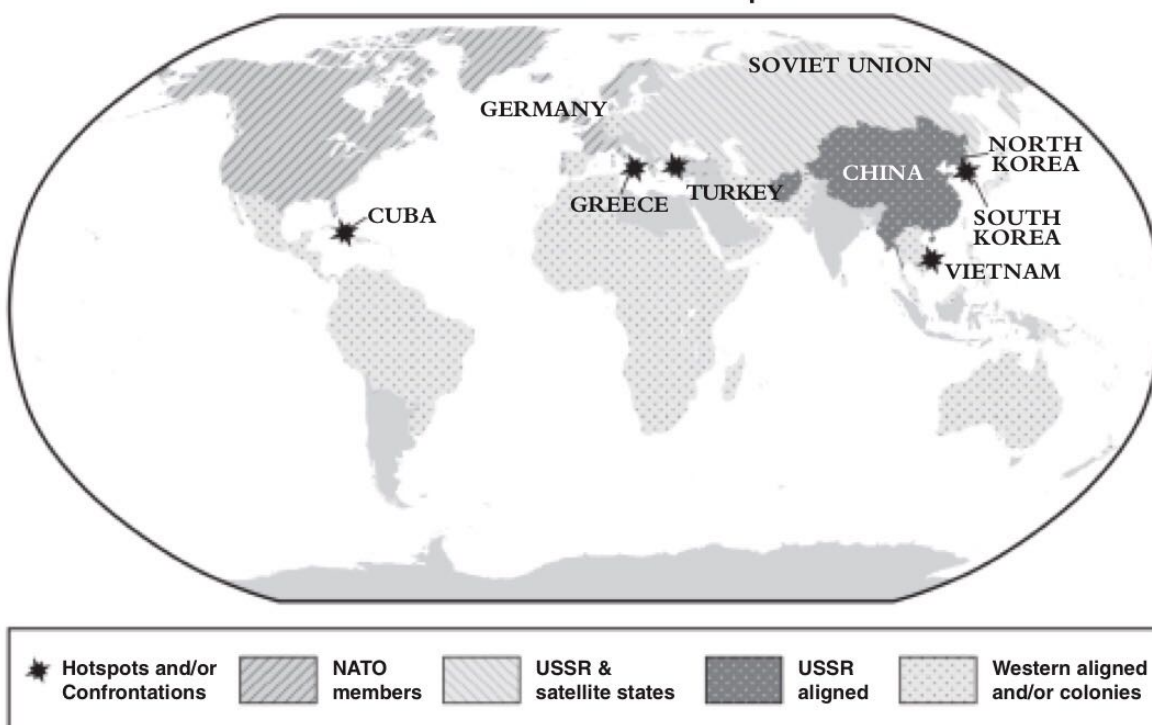


occupied the western half of Germany. The Soviets occupied the eastern half. Agreements made at Yalta and Potsdam were supposed to have settled the future status of Western and Eastern European countries affected by the war. However, after the war officially ended, it became apparent that the Soviet Union was not going to relinquish control over the Eastern European territories it occupied during the war. The Soviets viewed these states as a buffer against future aggression from the West. Even though the countries of Eastern Europe were officially independent, the Soviet Union had immense influence over their governments and internal affairs. The so-called Soviet bloc was made up of East Germany and these satellite nations of the USSR. The United States distrusted the motives of the Soviet Union and believed the Soviets were intent on bringing about a global communist revolution.

After China became a communist state in 1949 and the United States recognized it could not free Eastern Europe from Soviet influence, the United States established a policy of containment. The policy used military, economic, and political means to stop the spread of communism outside of the areas where it was currently practiced. Containment drove the direction of U.S. foreign policy throughout the Cold War.

Three Alignments The Cold War thus caused a division of the world into three alignments. The “First World” was the United States and its allies. The “Second World” was the Soviet Union, the Soviet bloc countries of Eastern Europe, and other communist nations around the world. The third alignment was often called the “Third World” but was more accurately described as the non-aligned countries that did not have close military or ideological ties with any of the First or Second World countries.

Cold War Blocs and Hotspots



As the map on the previous page shows, the United States was the First World superpower situated in the Western Hemisphere. The dominant superpower in the Second World, the Soviet Union, was in the Eastern Hemisphere. These superpowers represented a geopolitical balance of power. Third World countries were mainly those with colonial pasts; they were in Asia, Africa, and Oceania in the Eastern Hemisphere and Latin America in the Western Hemisphere.

Superpower Rivalries

One result of the superpower rivalry was the division of Europe. The western portion had, for the most part, democratic and free-market societies, while the eastern portion was autocratic and communist. The dividing line ran through Germany, which was divided into the two independent countries of West and East Germany. The capital city of Berlin was similarly divided. The Iron Curtain, as it was termed, reflected the Western democratic view that the Soviet-bloc countries were a threat to the individual freedoms and liberty of the people living on both sides of the border. The Soviets believed, based on their historical perspective, that the Western democracies were intent on invading the Soviet Union. Mistrust on both sides led to a nuclear arms race that was an existential threat to Europe and the world.

The Arms Race The United States developed an atomic bomb at the end of World War II. It used the bomb to end the conflict with Japan by dropping two of them—one on the city of Hiroshima and the other on Nagasaki. The devastation to the two cities shocked the world. The Soviet Union soon developed its own nuclear weapon, and the nuclear arms race was on. The number of nuclear weapons and the means to use them increased for both states. Relations between the superpowers grew tense, and the fear in Europe, and elsewhere, was that any provocation could lead to nuclear annihilation. Both the United States and the Soviet Union took defensive actions that resulted in Europe becoming what was effectively an armed camp with millions of troops and weapons, both conventional and nuclear, facing off against each other.

During this time, two international military alliances formed. The United States and its allies formed the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The Soviet Union and its allies created the Warsaw Pact. Both groups sought to ensure collective security through military cooperation. Part of the “cold” factor in the Cold War is that there never was direct, “hot” military conflict between the two superpowers. But the brinkmanship and proxy battles that characterized this war put most people on Earth on edge whenever the United States and the Soviets appeared poised to launch a nuclear attack.

Hopes for Greater Self-Government

The high point of empires and colonization was World War I. The British, the French, and other Europeans had colonized almost all of Africa, India, and Southeast Asia, and they dominated China. The Turkish Ottoman Empire

controlled the Middle East. But the desire for self-government that had fueled colonial rebellions throughout the Americas in the 18th and 19th centuries as well as national independence movements in Europe in the 19th century spread throughout the world in the 20th century. The two world wars crystallized the opposition to the empires. Although most hopes for independence remained unfulfilled after World War I, the war did result in the breakup of two large multiethnic empires, Austria-Hungary and Ottoman Turkey.

World War II, however, accelerated the dismantling of global colonial empires. Between the end of World War II in 1945 and the year 2000, the number of independent states more than doubled, going from around 75 to around 190.

As the Cold War established new alignments among both newer and established states, it extended far beyond its ideological roots and exerted political, economic, social, and cultural influence on nearly all parts of the globe.

Comparing Political Effects of the Cold War

The Cold War affected the Eastern and Western Hemispheres in similar ways, since each was dominated by a superpower and also had former colonies and emerging new nations. However, most countries in the Western Hemisphere had become independent long before the Cold War. The Eastern Hemisphere paid an especially heavy price as a result of the Cold War, since several key proxy conflicts were located in Asia and Africa. Nonetheless, rivalries between the superpowers played out in both hemispheres.

Many transitions to independence were largely peaceful and nonviolent; others involved open armed rebellions. In some cases, these insurgent movements were led by communist groups and supported by the Soviet Union, such as in Vietnam and Angola. As a result, the United States would either support the colonial power against the communist insurgency or would support opposition groups that would establish a non-communist government. Often these Western-backed governments proved to be unpopular with the majority of the people, which only heightened anti-imperialist feelings.

Political Effects in Asia The Cold War brought armed conflict and played a part in internal revolts and crises in some countries of Asia. The U.S. policy of containment led to wars in Korea and Vietnam. Communist revolutions overtook Cambodia and Laos. The Soviets invaded Afghanistan to prop up the communist government in that country. Anti-communist crackdowns occurred in Indonesia and the Philippines. Communist China had a falling-out with the Soviet Union and began to seek better relations with the United States.

Political Effects in Africa As with Asia, the Cold War brought conflict and turmoil to Africa. Communist insurrections supported by the Soviet Union were often met by government resistance supported with arms supplied by the United States. Communist governments came to power in Ethiopia and Angola. In the case of Angola's war for independence from Portugal, the Soviet Union and the United States fought a proxy war. The Soviets supported the use



of Cuban soldiers and provided arms and military training to help establish a communist-style government in the country. The United States provided arms and supported anti-communist groups.

Political Effects in the Western Hemisphere Latin America also experienced the results of the Cold War conflict between the superpowers. Communist revolutions were successful in Cuba and Nicaragua. Communist insurrections, sometimes backed by the Soviet Union or Cuba, occurred in El Salvador, Columbia, Peru, and Guatemala. The United States would support the government in power—often a dictatorship made up of military officers or right-wing politicians—to try to stop the spread of communism.

Comparing Economic Effects of the Cold War

The Cold War divided Europe in economics as well as politics. The Western countries, aided by the United States’ Marshall Plan, rebuilt their economies after the destruction of World War II with a mixture of free-market principles and state-sponsored economic development. The Eastern bloc nations struggled in a transition away from communism to free-market economies. Developing countries—those in the “Third World”—faced unique challenges.

State Response to Economic Challenges in the West To promote economic security, many Western European governments created public health systems, built public housing, provided unemployment insurance, and developed state-backed pension plans. The creation of the welfare state, as it became known, was to counteract the attraction of the communist system that promised to provide many of these benefits. As a result, the Western European nations’ economies boomed while the Eastern European economies, under a communist system, struggled to recover from the costs and effects of the war.

Health Care Insurance Coverage by Country			
Country	Percentage Covered by a Government Program	Percentage Covered by Private Insurance	Total Percentage of Population Covered
Denmark	100	0	100
Greece	100	0	100
Australia	100	0	100
South Africa	84	16	100
Germany	89	11	100
United Kingdom	100	0	100
United States	36	55	91
India	22	5	27

Source: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Data for 2016

State Response to Economic Challenges in the Eastern Bloc The Soviet government quickly transitioned its economy after the war to peacetime endeavors. Yet the military-industrial complex was so large in the Soviet Union that it employed about 20 percent of the workers, many of whom became unemployed during the transition. The Soviet-bloc countries faced a serious economic crisis as the government instituted economic reforms to encourage free-market practices and move away from a state-controlled economy.

However, moving from a state-controlled to a free-market economy proved to be an extremely complex endeavor. Debates swirled about whether to institute reforms gradually or all at once, and party officials resisted the loss of their control over the economy. In the end, reformers have succeeded in removing state controls over prices, and formerly state-owned businesses have been privatized. After a period of decline, the Russian economy is improving.

China made a more gradual transition to a free-market economy and has become a global economic powerhouse.

State Response to Economic Challenges in Developing Countries Many former colonies still had close economic ties to the countries that had colonized them and remained dependent on the extraction and exporting of natural resources. The perspective of many people in the former colonies was that the industrial countries were using this relationship to exploit and undermine the economies of these developing countries. Getting control of their resources was a top priority of developing nations. Oil-rich Angola, for example, left in disarray after years of civil war, has a government-controlled oil conglomerate that accounts for about 70 percent of government revenue and has helped the nation rebuild and update infrastructure.

Comparing Social and Cultural Effects

The tension and turmoil of the Cold War era created social effects for all sides involved. For example, the proxy wars cost millions of people their lives, especially in Southeast Asia. In the Vietnam war alone, two million soldiers and two million civilians died over 20 years of conflict. Bombs destroyed villages, and chemical defoliants killed anything growing on farmlands. Families were separated and displaced. Many rural villagers left for the city, where they thought they could find safety. Saigon, the capital city, tripled in size as refugees from the countryside flooded in. Most of the fighting took place in South Vietnam, so it sustained the most damage, but North Vietnam was also bombed—especially such infrastructure as railroads and highways.

Social Tensions The Cold War created suspicions as well. Americans were afraid of communist infiltration, and some people's careers were ruined when they were unjustly accused of being communists. In the Soviet Union, people were afraid to express their beliefs openly if they disagreed with the government. They knew they could be sent away to a political prison camp. People everywhere lived under the threat of a nuclear attack. Some people built bomb shelters where they hoped they could safely weather an atomic attack.



Cultural Effects With greater personal freedom, and with help from the United States, Western Europeans experienced a cultural rebirth after World War II. Scientific research, music, art, and architecture flourished. Eastern Europe, in contrast, lacked freedom of expression. Because of the Cold War, governments actively blocked the spread of Western culture. The people of Eastern Europe did not see much in the way of cultural achievements beyond those that were government-sponsored or approved.

During the Cold War, many people from former colonies moved to the metropole (see Topic 8.6), furthering the blending of cultures. At the same time, the imperial powers left a legacy of culture in their former colonies, including the languages spoken, as the chart below shows.

European-Based Languages Spoken Widely in Sub-Saharan Africa		
Language	Number of Native Speakers	Countries Where the Language is Common
French	120 million	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senegal • Democratic Republic of the Congo
Portuguese	14 million	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Angola • Mozambique
Dutch (Afrikaans)	7 million	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South Africa
English	7 million	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South Africa
Spanish	1 million	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equatorial Guinea

In places where a Cold War superpower had maintained order, such as Afghanistan and Yugoslavia, violent culture clashes occurred when the superpower retreated. In Yugoslavia, for example, which had been stitched together and annexed to Serbia after World War I, ethnic tensions flared as Serbia's ultra-nationalist president, Slobodan Milosevic, pitted one group against another to strengthen his own position after the fall of the Soviet Union left a power vacuum. Wars in the region took tens of thousands of lives and created hundreds of thousands of refugees. (Connect: Analyze the changing goals for both superpowers during the Cold War. See Topics 8.1, 8.3, and 8.8.)

Development of Global Institutions

The end of the Cold War and the growth of globalization has reset the geopolitical framework. The idea of a balance of power has yielded to a more cooperative approach as countries recognize global interdependence. To further cooperation, global organizations such as the United Nations and the World Trade Association have been established. Others address such transnational issues as environmental degradation and global warming, human rights, and epidemic diseases.